



LOOKING INTO THE LIVES OF WOMEN THROUGH DREAMS OF TRESPASS, TALES OF A HAREM GIRLHOOD

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we aim to analyze Fatima Mernissi's book *Dreams of Trespass, Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. Although Mernissi's works are widely analyzed, this autobiographical work by Mernissi has somehow escaped the thorough analysis of Muslim feminist scholars. This paper talks about the institution of the harem through Mernissi's experiences. This paper also talks about how these confined women still show their resistance in different ways. The paper talks about four women characters in this book who shows resistance and dreams to be empowered one day.

We assert that Mernissi's goal in writing this book is to make the reader aware of Muslim women living in harems. Since this book is not only about Mernissi's experiences in the harem but the experiences of the other women living in the harem along with Mernissi, then this work comes under the realm of Islamic Feminism. Hence, Islamic feminism and its critics are also discussed here.

KEYWORDS: Harem, Hudud (frontiers), Patriarchy, Polygamy, Space

Harem: according to the analyzed book, *Dreams of trespass*, the word 'harem' is used in regards to when the author talks about the Mernissi household but a harem usually means a traditional Moroccan urban household which is generally located in the old Medina city. It is where the whole extended family lives and it's also where women are made to seclude themselves from the outside world. These harem households were only prevalent in the upper classes of society because they are the only ones who can afford to seclude their women folks.

Hudud: hudud means frontiers and this book is basically about hudud and how the woman wants to cross that hudud from the harem.

INTRODUCTION

Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) was a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist, who was born in Fez in 1940 in a middle-class family and died in 2015. She grew up in a sex-segregated household with her affluent paternal grandmother. She wanted to change the world for the betterment of everyone concerned. In her works, she critiqued the traditional authorities and exposed the misogyny that Muslim scholars have spread regarding the interpretations of the Prophet's actions and words. According to Mernissi, Prophet Muhammad was a revolutionary man, and he loved and respected women. Mernissi is recognized as an Arab-Muslim feminist in her own country and internationally. She was well known in her feminist circle, especially in France. Her books have been translated into many languages, including English, Japanese, Dutch, and German. She used to write regularly on the issues concerning women. Her work delves into the relationship between gender identity, the status of women in Islam, sexual ideology, and sociopolitical organization. But her work primarily focuses on Moroccan culture and its society. Her work as feminist attempts to represent the elements of the society that silences and oppresses Muslim women. She challenges the patriarchal Muslim male addresses that primarily concern women and she tries to give voice to Muslim women's

difficulties.

Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood is Mernissi's only fictionalized work in form of a semi-autobiography. The analyzed novel provides a rare glimpse into the life of Mernissi through her reflections on her early childhood. This book was written in 1994 and it is set in 1940s Fez, Morocco. In this work, Mernissi narrates the story of her childhood through a seven years old young girl narrator (presumably young Mernissi herself). The young narrator narrates her story by what she thinks of the adult harem life. The novel is also about women's resistance to power relations of both genders and how separate gendered spaces are created. For example, in the novel, Mernissi portrays the terrace as a place for women's transgressions. The terrace is the place where women and children come together by stepping on the borders of patriarchy, to listen to the different stories including that of Scheherazade. All the chapters of this book are the manifestation of different women characters living in that harem and they also represent different themes. The main feminist characters of this book are her mother, cousin Chama, Aunt Habiba, and her grandmother Yasmina.

Mernissi herself describes her book as “une biographie romancée, un roman autobiographique où j'explique que le féminisme ne me vient pas de l'Occident, mais des femmes de harem” (a fictional biography, an autobiographical novel, in which I explain that feminism does not come to me from the West, but from harem women)¹. The concept of the harem is demystified in this book and Raja Rhouni calls it a “site of pleasure and women's idleness”². The book was written to decenter western feminism from its originating place (i.e. the west) to Islamic culture.

Mernissi uses the themes in this book to manifest women's empowerment through storytelling, theatre, and by showing the day-to-day life in a Moroccan harem. Mernissi shows how women's lives are restricted because of the harem. In this book,

Mernissi tries to give some meaning to the word 'harem' by narrating her grandmother's life in some chapters of her book. The word 'harem' means different things to different characters of the book which divides them into different groups, for instance, Lalla Mani accepts the harem life whereas her mother opposes this life. The "tales of a Moroccan girlhood" are the tales of all these women living this 'harem' life.

Dreams of Trespass is also about *hudud* (frontiers) and how the women characters defy that *hudud*. The book opens with the lines: "I was born in a harem in 1940 in Fez, a ninth-century Moroccan city some five thousand kilometers west of Mecca, and one thousand kilometers south of Madrid, one of the dangerous capitals of the Christians. The problems with the Christians start, said Father, as with women, when the *hudud*, or sacred frontier, is not respected. I was born amid chaos since neither Christians nor women accepted the frontiers. Right on our threshold, you could see women of the harem contesting and fighting with Ahmed the doorkeeper as the foreign armies from the North kept arriving all over the city. Foreigners were standing right at the end of our street, which lay just between the old city and the Ville Nouvelle, a new city that they were building for themselves. When Allah created the earth, said Father, he separated men from women and put a sea between Muslims and Christians for a reason. Harmony exists when each group respects the prescribed limits of the other, trespassing leads only to sorrow and unhappiness. But women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession". This passage talks about the French creating a separate space for themselves as 'Ville Nouvelle' and Moroccans creating a space for women, by restricting them from going outside their 'harem'.

Mernissi reflects on her experiences of her harem life of her childhood as an adult woman. As a child, Mernissi thought that the actions of the women in her life were very empowering but later in her commentary, she addressed her own experience of the harem and said that the restricting life of the harem impacted a great deal on the lives of women living in her household. In this book, Mernissi shows how the lives of women were restricted and at the same time, she shows a contrasting image of how those women were also showing their resistance.

Islamic Feminism and its critique

The voices of Islamic feminists started to become recognized in the early 1900s, starting with Huda Sha'rawi of Egypt. But according to Leila Ahmed, it was only after secular feminism that these voices became recognized. Most of the time, Islamic feminism is not recognized. But Badran says that "Islamic feminism developed as a response to the rising Islamist movements, which had become more and more vocal in Muslim majority societies."³ Dr. Ziba Mir-Hosseini says that there is a new battle to be fought by Muslim women i.e. between modernity and tradition and further says that Islamic feminism must be done by the religious framework and language.⁴ Leila Ahmed in her work *Women and Gender in Islam* says that it is because of all these circumstances, [Islamic feminism] "searched a way to articulate female subjectivity and affirmation, within the native, vernacular, Islamic discourse – typically in terms of general, social, cultural, and religious renovation."⁵ In conclusion, we can say that the place that Islamic feminism made for itself is by employing religious framework and language to give women some power.

Islamic feminism's main criticism is that its identification is contradictory. Miriam Cooke talks about this when summarizing Haideh Moghissi's viewpoint: "The Qur'an, for Moghissi, is

unequivocally opposed to gender equality and the Shariah is not compatible with the principles of equality of human beings."⁷

According to Raja Rhouni, the problem with Islamic feminists is the methodology they use to promote their cause. She says that the main problem with Islamic feminism is that they try to reinterpret the verses of the Qur'an itself, as they try to give egalitarian meaning to the Qur'anic verses which are androcentric by nature of their language. She even goes ahead and says that "The Qur'an remains a book that incites the search for justice and social transformations.... [it] is not a repository book of law that feminists can easily use to advocate women's rights."⁸ Kecia Ali in her book *Sexual Ethics and Islam* talks about the same argument and says that "we need to defend the necessity of equality as a component of justice, not simply assert it as Qur'anic. Simplistic invocations of justice and equity in the Qur'anic text are insufficient."⁹

To conclude, we can say that Islam feminism talks about the relationship between women's empowerment and uses Islam and the Qur'anic verses as an outline for interpretation to give voice to Muslim women.

Literary Analysis of *Dreams of Trespass*

In this novel, Mernissi talks about the concept of Harem to talk about Moroccan society and its gender dynamics. She talks about two different harems in this book, one harem is where she lives which is in Fez and another one is where her grandmother Yasmina lives which is situated in rural Morocco. The book opens and shows two contrasting images of haram: one is which represents the *hudud* (frontier) which differentiates between *haram*¹⁰ and *halal*¹¹. Young Mernissi recalls that her father told her that these frontiers were there for the protection of women and also that they cannot cross or trespass that frontier. She learned that harem also meant the "other" or the French or the outsiders. Because the French were ruling Morocco at the time, for the locals, a harem was something that, "protected us from the foreigners standing a few meters away, at another equally busy and dangerous frontier – the one that separated our old city, the Medina, from the new French city, the Ville Nouvelle".¹² Hence the harem's *hudud* is also presented as something necessary to protect the women of the harem from the intrusion of the "other".

When talking about the women of the harem, she says that the women of the Fez harem test their power by exploring their limitations, and in addition to this, they find support and strength from each other. Mother and Aunt Habiba are the two important figures from the Fez harem and they are the ones who despite all the constraints, stand up for themselves, her mother is very vocal about her displeasure of being confined in a harem and she even teaches her daughter to grow up to be independent women. Mernissi portrays harem in a way that restricts her mother's capability to express her true self.

Mernissi's Aunt Habiba is a divorcee and hence she is living in Mernissi's father's harem. The description of the character of Aunt Habiba shows how being a divorcee means one has to live a life full of shame, isolation, and sadness.

The women in the farm harem of her grandmother Yasmina are described by Mernissi as less restrictive because of the absence of physical walls in that harem. Regarding the absence of walls in the farm harem, grandmother Yasmina once said that "The farm was a harem, although it did not have walls... Wherever tare human beings, there is *qa'ida* or invisible rule. If you stick to the *qa'ida*, nothing bad can happen to you".¹³ The "*qa'ida*"

described by grandmother Yasmina means the invisible rules and regulations that they have to follow and the *qa'ida* places men in charge or in the power of making decisions regarding women. Even though farm harem did not have any physical walls but the women of that harem were surrounded by *qa'ida* or the invisible walls.

In this harem, grandmother Yasmina is the one who contradicts the rules and regulations of the harem.

Then Mernissi describes another character's arrival on the farm harem, of Tamou. Tamou is described as a powerful character, who is unlike any other woman on the farm. Tamou comes to the farm asking for help, coming from the Northern mountains of the Rif region of Morocco, where her people were fighting the French. Tamou's character is described as someone who is unlike any usual Moroccan woman and doesn't follow the *qa'ida* of any harem. Tamou is the exact opposite of the women living in the harem. She rides horses, carries a *khandjar* or a dagger and a Spanish rattle, and is not afraid to travel in a foreign part of the country alone. Tamou's characteristics are very powerful and none of the other women of the harem shares them.

The Dreams of Trespass is heavily laden with the concept of Patriarchy. The patriarchy in the Arab and Muslim world, in general, is mainly exerted through the dominance of space. The "public" space is more for men and the "private" space is for women. The same can also be seen in the analyzed book, "Our house gate was a definite *hudud*, or frontier because you needed permission to step in or out. Every move had to be justified and even getting to the gate was a procedure. If you were coming from the courtyard, you had to first walk down an endless corridor, and then you came face to face with Ahmed, the doorkeeper."¹⁴

This separation of the space ensures that men's honor and prestige are intact. Mernissi in the above lines is trying to show the difficulties faced by women just to step out of the gate. Men enjoy a lot of privileges like having their private area called "the men's salon", where they have all sorts of stuff including radio, which women are not allowed to listen to. But the women showed their resistance by making an illegal key to the radio and used to listen to it when men were not around. Because of all these inequalities, women looked for other forms of entertainment and empowered themselves with storytelling, theatre, and music, and by implanting Dreams of freedom into each other.

CONCLUSION

Through her book *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, Mernissi tried to unveil the conditions in which Moroccan women were living in their harems. She talked about male-female dynamics in a harem household through her autobiographical work. Mernissi talks about the seclusion of women and the patriarchal society of 1940s Morocco. Mernissi aimed to show her experiences of her childhood in a harem and she was successful in doing so. In her work, she portrays all the love and hardships that come along with harem life. The life of any Muslim woman in any Muslim household is equivalent to living in a harem because with or without a harem, they all have rules and restrictions or the invisible *hudud* that they have to follow. People are generally not aware of the life of Muslim women in the harem and this book sheds light on it. In her work, Mernissi used the concept of the harem to talk about the expression and resistance of women regarding the societal order. Mernissi's goal was to present her own childhood experience whilst talking about Islamic feminism in the Muslim-arab world.

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FOOTNOTES

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2. Raja Rhouni. *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*. the netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010. Print.
3. Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist*, 26.
4. Ziba, Mir-Hosseini, "The Construction of Gender in Islamic Legal Thought: Strategies for Reform," *Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World* 1, no. 1, 2003), 644.
5. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 175.
6. The Islamic Supreme Council defines Shariah as "the Islamic Law – the disciplines and principles that govern the behavior of a Muslim individual towards his or herself, family, neighbors, community, city, nation and the Muslim polity as a whole (Ummah)".
7. Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature*, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 57-58.
8. Rhouni, *Secular and Islamic Feminist*, 13-14.
9. Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 149, 150.
10. Haram means something that is forbidden.
11. Halal means permissible
12. Fatima Mernissi, *Dreams of Trespass, Tales of a Harem Girlhood*, (Basic Books, 1994), 22.
13. Ibid. 62.
14. Ibid. 21.